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Andrei Pleșu

Financing Difference: Fostering the Social Sciences in the Field of Tension Between Homogenization and Differentiation¹

I will begin with a little story, a true one. The first large private university in Romania was founded as early as 1990; its founder was anything but unknown. This person had spent a very long time as cadre director in the communist Ministry of Instruction, a position that gave him practically unlimited power in choosing and supporting teachers and professors on all levels throughout the country. Everyone's academic career went through his expert hands. In cooperation with the security forces, this person decided whether a professor was morally and ideologically "acceptable" and whether one could count on his "political correctness" and his militant zeal. Aside from these impressive prerogatives, the new apostle of privatization could point to another merit ensuring him invulnerability and inviolability. He was the one who had fabricated the bogus diplomas attesting Elena Ceausescu's university and research qualifications.

At that time, I had the honor of getting to know this party functionary personally when he called me to him in 1988 and urgently demanded that I break off all contact with my foreign friends, who were inevitably categorized as enemies of the people. "You are a weed in the garden of socialism," my interlocutor stated, "and weeds have to be rooted out!"

After the Revolution, this person got on wonderfully. He created the foundation "The Romania of Tomorrow" – what other name could the foundation have taken!? – and, using money he had discreetly amassed in the good old days as well as the connections that had survived the great upheavals of 1989, managed to put on its feet a university that is still the largest of its kind in Romania. But what is especially interesting is that this member of the former nomenclature also enjoys substantial foreign support, especially from the United States.

I had just been made Minister of Culture when it reached my ears that a group of "experts" from across the Atlantic had diverted funds – originally earmarked for the Ministry of Education – to this new institution of higher education in the hands of the old specialist in ideological landscape architecture. The donors' arguments were irrefutable: We don't want to support the crypto-communist government, we want to give private initiative a chance, they said. The Minister of Education at the time was an outstanding philosopher who had earned his doctorate at the end of the 1930s with Gabriel Marcel. During the dictatorship, he had not been permitted to teach, among other reasons because the cadre director had displayed exemplary watchfulness. The cadre director was rewarded for this watchfulness a second time, this time by the US political experts: Suddenly he was the great reformer and a pioneer of privatization, while his victim, the former student of Gabriel Marcel, had served communism, solely because he was the Minister of Education in the first post-revolutionary government, which the worldwide intelligentsia had simply labeled a continuation of the Ceausescu regime!

This true story, I believe, can make very clear some aspects of the *privatization* in the formerly communist countries as well as illuminate some cases of *external funding* often enjoyed by these countries' often fragile institutions.

Privatization in Eastern Europe – in education as in other areas – is far from being a linear and clear process. The first to dare the step into the private economy tended to be dubious characters. These were people with enough money to take a business risk; and that meant they could only have been beneficiaries of the earlier regime. The heroes of beginning capitalism, unfortunately,

¹ This paper was read in Berlin at a symposium on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the founding of the Volkswagen Foundation. Andrei Pleșu contributed it as a foreword to this volume with the gracious permission of the VW Foundation. Malte Kessler translated the paper from the Romanian into German, and Mitch Cohen translated the German version into English. The printed version deviates slightly from the text of the lecture.

were not the enlightening liberal, but the entrepreneur with a suspicious past or the simple adventurer. The founder of a private university is not driven by new rules and principles, by a vision of reforming the development of instruction, but quite simply by the instinct for a profitable investment.

His clients are not completely innocent, either. Most of the students who matriculate at a private university do so because they have not been accepted at a state university. Ambitious parents indulge in the luxury of buying the title of “student” for their children, and that makes the whole family feel one social rank higher. With such criteria of selection, we can assume that only exceptions among the young people at the private universities are really capable of competing. As for the professors, they usually see their activity at the newly founded private institutions of higher education as an additional source of income to supplement their meager salaries. Until 1994, the corps of professors at the private universities consisted of practically the same people as at the state universities.¹

The chair at the “private employer” was felt to be a “second job”, a lucrative supplement to the “main position”. Later, regulations were passed that forced the private institutions to hire at least 50 percent of their professors “full time”, but this did not improve the situation: The chairs at these universities became refuges for pedagogical failures.

Despite all the expectations aroused by the “magical” concept of “privatization”, the first private institutions of higher education proved unable to come up with the necessary coefficients of renewal and restructuring in the global institutional landscape. The mere fact that the private universities are rapidly increasing in number (five years ago, there were 62 state and 40 private universities in Romania, while only 10 private universities were accredited in Russia) provides no guarantee of an optimal course of the reform process.

And now we come to the foreign financial donors. In itself, the idea of tying generosity to a given direction is quite welcome. But the precondition is that this generosity is based on good knowledge of the “terrain”. Without reliable information and without constant effort to adjust to local conditions, philanthropy runs the risk of turning into an inefficient and ineffective choreography, a benevolent naiveté. In other words, the sponsor must know very precisely *whom* he is helping and what the beneficiary’s specific configuration is. To this end, he needs competent, credible advisors who are intimately familiar with the local state of affairs. Simply reading the newspapers or showing up for a 2- to 3-day plunge in the “exotic” landscape of the country in question can hardly provide enough data. The fact that people work with overly extensive and overly general concepts – and “Central and Eastern Europe” is already one of them – is already evidence of superficiality. The problem of financing institutions in Poland is fundamentally different from the problems of financing similar institutions in Slovenia, Bulgaria, or Moldova. Helping Ukraine presents completely different strategic and tactical problems than does helping Romania, Slovakia, or Macedonia. Without strict competence on the *differences* between the countries that once belonged to the communist bloc and without a nuanced understanding of the differences in mentalities and historical stages between the sponsoring and the sponsored countries, the danger is that the attempts to help will miss their target.

Good intentions are a noble moral motive, but are not sufficient. It would be ideal to find a balance between the demands of making East and West compatible, local desires (or urgent needs), and the deeper expectations of the researchers in the East.

These are researchers who were forced to work on prescribed topics for decades and whom one clearly cannot expect to immediately see that, to gain access to money, scientific interest must be repackaged in orientation toward a new repertoire of topics. Topics that, although not commissioned and prescribed, are still imposed by economic, social, and sometimes even ideological constraints. These are researchers who had to submit to specific methods, languages, and strategies that were decided outside their individual choice. The concrete language (of “politically correctness”) may be less absurd than the wooden language (of political conformity), but that does not make it any less standardized and, fundamentally, any more agreeable. And

finally, these are researchers who, even during their training, were forced to accept a strict “canon” of bans and permissions. What they expected from the “normalization” after 1989 was the freedom of a canon devoid of political sensitivities, and not the limitations of a new canon with new bans and new permissions. These researchers are shaped by the long-lasting pressure of politicization, driven and tormented by arbitrary censors whose sole competence consisted in dividing libraries between the permitted books on the one side and the “dangerous” books on the other side. To approach these minds with new lists of taboos, with fashionable recommendations and regulations, is an approach not devoid of a certain “mental cruelty”.

This reminds me of a story about Ava Gardner that I found in a text by Wolfgang Frühwald. Ava Gardner decided to leave one of her husbands and submitted “mental cruelty” as grounds for divorce. Asked to explain this in greater detail, she said Thomas Mann’s *Magic Mountain* was the cause. “He forced me to read this damned book!” Mutatis mutandis, Eastern Europe’s intellectuals sometimes feel like Ava Gardners terrorized by “civilizing” spouses. And in this case, it’s not even Thomas Mann.

All these remarks are meant only to underscore that what is needed is not only good intentions, but also tact. Action must be taken simultaneously on the levels of money, of institutions, and of mentalities. In a European Commission report on the state of the educational system in Romania in 1997, two main hurdles are mentioned: the low funding provided by the government and the general resistance to changes. The funds are indeed minimal, on average 4 percent of gross domestic product (i.e., 4 percent of an already modest sum). Additionally, the education budget is the first thing sacrificed when urgent needs arise – for example in 1999, when a substantial part of this budget was used to pay off foreign debt.²

The resistance against changes, in turn, is not stubborn rejection, but more an unsureness about the proposed project and the legitimate wish to save what still can be saved of local traditions, accumulations, and experience. Even if, for example, the balance of curriculum reform, institutional decentralization, and preparation for school in several specific areas of developing practical abilities has been modest, the system can still be quite competitive in the area of general education. In this area, “backwardness” is more a triumph, and the outmoded sympathy for the “encyclopedia of knowledge” deserves to be rethought and re-evaluated in a world where young people on the street answer the question “What is the Holy Trinity?” with, at best, “Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité!”

Here we should add that the Central and Eastern European researcher, slightly schizophrenically, strives simultaneously for European integration while maintaining a certain mental identity and a certain autochthonic “tone” of his own. In other words, he wants to join a symphonic team, not a predictable monotony.

For this reason, the sponsor who decides to promote a synchronization of Eastern European research and education with that of the West must come up with a twofold, somewhat self-contradictory strategy. On the one hand, he has to finance the *homogenization* of the two academic realms, and on the other hand, he has to maintain each of their *specificities*, specialnesses, and peculiarities. People often speak about the high demands for homogenization, more rarely about maintaining specificities, and when they do, then in vague terms. Up to a point, this differing stance is understandable. European integration cannot take place as long as the East and the West are at different stages of development, as long as the two halves of the continent do not speak the same institutional, logistical, and structural language. Before the issue of the “specific differences” and of local color can be approached, bringing Eastern Europe back to *normality* must have undisputed priority. In the years after 1989, significant progress has been made in this respect: the circulation of students and professors in both directions, access to information, the provisioning of libraries, generous academic support programs (grants, summer universities, transdisciplinary debates, etc.).

But this does not mean the process is completed. At least in Romania, there is still a chronic lack of specialists (especially in the educational system), and decades of dictatorship have

enormously weakened some disciplines (archaeology, art history, economics and legal studies, religious studies, etc.). As already mentioned, there is also a severe lack of funds for instruction and research, which greatly hampers university life – from the condition of the buildings to the lack of the usual amenities (student dormitories, cafeterias, student rates for public transportation), from the halfway adequate stipends for students to the salaries of professors. Subscriptions to specialized journals, the purchase of books, opportunities to take direct part in international academic life – all of these suffer from the need to economize. Taken together, this shows that the *difference* between East and West is precisely the kind of difference that reflects the East's precarious position and that must be eliminated.

The question that thereby arises is whether there is another kind of difference, a difference that deserves to be maintained, fostered, and offered to the West as an alternative experiment, without thereby giving up efforts toward “normalization”. For example, I have often asked myself how a Central European university would have to be to be truly useful, a university like the one in Budapest, which exists thanks to the generous financing from George Soros. Should it take competitiveness with the other great European universities as its unwavering goal? Do we in Budapest, Sofia, Bucharest, or Zagreb want to feel just like Heidelberg, Uppsala, or the Sorbonne (and is this even possible)?

I, personally, would think about an individualized *design* of such universities, making use of local sources and archives and local competences. Here, chairs would naturally find their place whose content would be determined by the intellectual and historical strengths of the region. In such a space of broad religious and denominational diversity (Catholicism, Orthodoxy, Protestantism, Judaism, Islam), a chair for interreligious studies definitely makes sense, and the same is true for ecumenical studies with an emphasis on the sociology of tolerance. Legitimate would also be an intensification of Byzantine studies, a field still very limited in the West, but which is essential today more than ever, since a true European unification is unthinkable without a good base of knowledge of the continent's eastern resources. Another urgent project, it seems to me, is the founding of permanent research centers on eastern Jewry, with its extensive ramifications from Czernowitz to Vienna, from Poland to the isolated enclaves south of the Danube. The field of dictatorship, authoritarian regimes, and transition economies would be studied primarily in the eastern universities, where libraries and “laboratories”, theory and “fieldwork”, so to speak, lie in close proximity. I think it is much more normal to study the physiology of communism and the sociology of poverty in Bucharest, Belgrade, or Bratislava than in Munich or Montreal.

In brief, it is my opinion that a financing of the restructuring projects that was more imaginative, more flexible, and more attentive to the local resources would be very welcome. Here we could also consider not only a diversification, but also a certain *specialization* of financial sources. I think, for example, that private foundations are better suited than state institutions to be *sponsors of difference*. Relatively untouched by the travails of political relationships and bureaucratically coded state interests, they could take the time for labor-intensive, thorough field research and the liberty of less conventional initiatives.

In this respect, the New Europe College's experience with the French sponsors has been illuminating. We wanted them as our partners from the beginning, but we kept bumping into the limits of a system in which the practice, and I would even say the “culture”, of the foundations is very limited. The money comes from the state, so the state sets the conditions. And it does so in accordance with the priorities of its own strategies – which is certainly normal. For example, every financial support must be justified by a certain propagandistic component or by arguments of “national policy”. Chances for funding are thus restricted to the more or less francophone and necessarily francophile projects. One could slightly derisively exaggerate and claim that, because it lacks the instrument of private foundations, France can really only finance itself, even if it does so indirectly, through external institutions and projects. In other countries, there are foundations that, without submitting to political or national criteria, are active in a limited range of topics. One

example of this is the Templeton Foundation, which funds only research projects concerned with the relation between science and religion.

The addition of a third element could add certain freshness to the relationship between Western donors and Eastern recipients. The danger, namely, is that the binomial relationship “donor-recipient” will turn into an oversimplifying routine. In reality, both the backward poor and the flourishing model face new challenges that they have to master together. Beyond the fact of giving and the fact of taking lies *seeking*. The prospect of globalization presents us with challenges that neither East nor West are prepared for – even if the West’s variant of unpreparedness is organized and more stable, while the East’s variant of unpreparedness is confused and impoverished. But the one and the other are both seeking for solutions. And this common search creates space for countless forms of partnership: the asymmetries can complement each other harmoniously, the differences can become inexhaustible reservoirs of ideas.

The problem of “models” is growing more complicated by the day. In a certain way, we have the advantage this time: We have a model, a suitable point of reference – the West. But what are the West’s models? Where are the coordinates to be sought for the unavoidable necessity to restructure that will spare no one in the coming era? In the United States of America? In the Netherlands, as some suggest? In Japan? No one knows yet. The uncertainty in which East and West are suspended, in different rhythms and on different levels, is the danger and simultaneously the opportunity of tomorrow.

No matter how much the developed countries may have done and how much that is not done the formerly communist countries pursue, we find ourselves, on both sides, faced with decisive and unforeseeable changes and upheavals. Everything is still before us. The revolution of globalization corresponds to a planetary change of climate. And if we have to go through a planetary change of climate, it makes absolutely no difference whether one lives in a villa or in a tent. Survival solutions can be found for both variants – on the condition that we know the advantages and disadvantages of each.

¹ All the information presented in this section is taken from a paper by Robert D. Reisz, *Education for the Transition. Part III. Higher Educational Policy in Central and Eastern Europe*, published under the aegis of the CEP and the IWM, Budapest (1997-).

² See Andrei Marga, *Unterrichtsreform und die Herausforderungen des neuen Jahrhunderts*, New Europe College, 1999.